



INFORMATION BULLETIN

Bioterrorism Preparedness Planning Assistance from Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) and State Emergency Response Commissions (SERCs) to Public Health Departments

The National Domestic Preparedness Office (NDPO) has previously expressed support for Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPC), and State Emergency Response Commissions (SERCs) as planning bodies for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) preparedness. This statement of support focused on the LEPCs' role in preparing for acts of chemical terrorism. The purpose of this Information Bulletin is to expand the NDPO's support for LEPCs to include their participation in the formulation of statewide and regional preparedness and response plans developed by State and local health departments for bioterrorism.

A resource for bioterrorism preparedness planning

Unlike other terrorist events involving WMD, a biological attack may not occur within a single jurisdiction. Disease clusters are likely to emerge in several locations before an actual bioterrorist event is identified and confirmed. The response will require early detection, identification, epidemiological investigation and disease outbreak intervention across multiple jurisdictions within or outside of the State of origin. Consequently, it is vital that the planning for bioterrorism be comprehensive, geographically wide-ranging, and coordinated through all levels of government.

SERCs and LEPCs are potentially well suited to assist States and local communities in the development of local, statewide and regional bioterrorism preparedness and response plans because of the composition of their membership and their support in numerous jurisdictions across the country. Under the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act of 1986 (EPCRA), the Governor in each State has designated a State Emergency Response Commission (SERC). The SERCs, in turn, have designated about 4,000 local emergency planning districts and appointed LEPCs for each district. In addition, a recent survey conducted by George Washington University showed that 23% of LEPCs who responded already have incorporated preparations for deliberate chemical releases by terrorists into their emergency plans and many have enlarged their scope of operations to include other weapons of mass destruction. These local resources can provide valuable support to State and local public health departments in the development of comprehensive local, statewide and regional plans and systems that will prepare for bioterrorism.

A forum for public health WMD preparedness

In a covert bioterrorism event, local health care providers and disease “sentinel” surveillance systems will be the first to observe related unusual illnesses and deaths. Public health professionals will lead the effort to identify the causative agent and conduct the epidemiological investigation. Though authorized primarily to address issues related to hazardous materials, LEPCs and SERCs often include representation from State and local public health departments. This situation creates an opportunity for State and local health departments to leverage resources in the development of comprehensive bioterrorism preparedness and response plans. LEPCs and SERCs can be a forum for public health officials to communicate with their WMD planning partners.

Recommendations

The NDPO strongly supports LEPCs and SERCs participating in the formulation of local, statewide and regional comprehensive bioterrorism preparedness and response systems and plans developed by State and local public health departments. LEPCs that seek to participate in the development of bioterrorism preparedness plans are encouraged to take the following actions:

- Offer to work with your State and local public health agencies and their bioterrorism preparedness and response programs. Start by contacting the State epidemiologist and other infectious disease public health officers in your State and local jurisdiction (Contact information about your State and local health department can be found at www.cdc.gov/other.htm). Once contact has been made with your public health agencies, discuss opportunities for collaborations between LEPCs, SERCs, and State and local health departments on developing bioterrorism preparedness plans.
- Contact pertinent groups involved in bioterrorism preparedness and response that have received funding for bioterrorism planning from the Centers for Disease Control or other agencies of the U.S. Public Health Service (i.e., Metropolitan Medical Response Systems, academic institutions, etc.).

Lastly, State and local health agencies, including infectious disease control officials, should actively participate in their respective SERC and LEPC meetings (Contact information about your LEPC can be found at www.epa.gov/ceppo/lepclist.htm). Public health departments should consider using the planning capacity of LEPCs and SERCs as a resource while developing comprehensive bioterrorism preparedness and response plans. Also, LEPCs that wish to include bioterrorism information in their local plans should seek the guidance of their State and local health department.

The NDPO encourages all parties involved with WMD preparedness planning to take part in the activities of their LEPCs and SERCs as appropriate. Questions or comments can be sent to the NDPO at ndpo@leo.gov, or call (202) 324-9025. For additional information about the Centers for Disease Control’s bioterrorism programs, see the CDC’s website at www.bt.cdc.gov. For additional information about LEPCs, SERCs, and the EPA’s Chemical Emergency Preparedness and Prevention Office, visit their website at www.epa.gov/ceppo.

This information is provided by the NDPO, in coordination with the Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Program at the Centers for Disease Control, the Office of Emergency Preparedness at the US Department of Health and Human Services, and the Chemical Emergency Preparedness and Prevention Office at the US Environmental Protection Agency. The NDPO was established to coordinate the Federal Government’s efforts to prepare the nation’s emergency response community for threats involving WMD.